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ABSTRACT

Various options for supporting the costs of learning by youths between the ages of 16 and 19 years in the United Kingdom were assessed. Currently available student support services were reviewed, and evidence documenting the link between supports and student success was presented. Data were collected from the following sources: current research on student support; inspection findings about support for students in further education (FE) colleges; input from selected college student services managers; and case studies of supports at five FE colleges. The following types of support were compared: (1) support with direct costs through fee remission; (2) support with indirect costs; (3) support for living costs; and (4) support through student welfare services. Although not all institutions reported higher retention rates among learners receiving funds, they nevertheless regarded supports as having a positive impact. Four systems for evaluating the impact of support and the following areas of good practice were discussed: regular monitoring of students' progress and attendance; sufficient guidance about available supports and counseling support; and an ethos of commitment to individual support. The following items are appended: the case studies; early findings from the Education Maintenance Allowance pilots; and a summary of research on 16-19 learner support arrangements. (Contains 11 references.) (MN)

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Support for the costs of learning

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Introduction

Many factors influence student success rates in colleges. This report examines the role played by 'student support', broadly defined as the range of services available to students that are designed to support them in practical ways as individuals rather than specifically with their learning. Hence, student support includes:

- financial support for tuition fees, books, course materials and accommodation
- help with childcare arrangements and / or costs
- the provision of transport to and from college
- personal welfare support, such as counselling.

For the purpose of this report, 'student support' does not include tuition, tutorial support, basic skills provision, support from library or learning centre staff, educational guidance or any other curriculum-linked activity that might be described as 'learning support'. The impact of these types of activity is considered in companion reports (Sadler 2002a, 2002b).

The report:

- outlines the range and scope of student support services currently available
- shows how the provision of support can contribute to student success
- identifies good practice in the provision of student support
- identifies how systems for evaluating the impact of support can be developed further.

This report is intended primarily for practitioners and service managers in colleges of further education. Staff in school sixth forms and local education authorities (LEAs) may also find it useful.

The report is based on:

- current research on student support
- an analysis of inspection findings about support for students in colleges
- the contributions of college student services managers who attended a Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) seminar in September 2000
- case studies from colleges in the Rais[illegible]ality and Achievement Programme, led by [illegible]e LSDA, where student support has been a [illegible]nponent of improvement strategies.

Types of support

For the purpose of this report, the types of support available to learners are categorised into four broad groupings.

A Support with direct costs through fee remission

One area of support that is often overlooked is fee remission. All colleges are required not to charge fees to certain categories of students:

- students aged 16–19 on full-time courses
- students in receipt of state means-tested benefits, or who are unwaged dependants of someone receiving such benefits
- students undertaking basic skills courses.

In addition, colleges may remit fees at their own expense for any student they consider to be experiencing hardship. Practice in this respect varies – some colleges charge no fees at all to any students.

A recent example of support of this type is the Individual Learning Account (ILA). Until ILAs were suspended (at least temporarily) in December 2001, amid allegations of malpractice by some providers, anyone opening an account was able to claim a fee discount on many FE courses. In most cases, individuals had to contribute at least part of the cost of their course themselves, but the ILA awards were not means-tested in any way. They were seen by many providers as a way of supporting learners in low-paid jobs, who often missed out on other forms of support.

B Support with indirect costs

This category involves supporting learners with costs closely linked to their participation in learning, such as:

- travel between home and college
- equipment and course materials
- clothing for the course
- childcare.

An example of this kind of scheme is the FE Residential Bursary Scheme, through which some colleges (generally those specialising in land-based or art and design courses) receive funding to support residential students.

C Support for living costs

Arrangements exist to support some learners with general living costs while they are learning, rather than with costs directly related to their course. The most substantial scheme in further education, the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), provides weekly payments to 16–18 year olds who continue in full-time education and whose family income falls below £30,000 pa. A maximum allowance is paid for incomes of less than £13,000 pa. EMAs impose conditions on the learner – for example, students must demonstrate satisfactory attendance and progress.

A number of different pilot EMA schemes are being tested in 2000–02 in specific geographic areas, involving various methods of targeting and means-testing. The government is still considering whether or not EMAs will become universal in the light of an evaluation of their impact (see also Appendix 2).

There is no equivalent to the EMA for adult students in further education. Nor is there a direct equivalent to the system of income-contingent loans that exists for learners in higher education. Some individuals are able to access Career Development Loans (CDLs), though the strict repayment terms associated with CDLs effectively confine them to the well qualified seeking a limited range of qualifications with high returns. Others use the benefits system for support, by limiting their hours of study to under 16 hours per week.

D Support through student welfare services

Most colleges operate a student welfare service, through which students can receive confidential advice on personal issues. This may involve:

- signposting students to external support agencies
- giving advice on accommodation and benefits
- providing a counselling service.

The scale and scope of these services vary, depending on the size of the college and its student population. The extent to which their activities are linked to the student's course also varies. Traditionally, a 'student welfare service' would operate as a service independent of the curricular activities of the college. Increasingly, colleges are approaching all such issues in the context of the student's progress, and looking at the provision of support as an activity linked to the curriculum. In some colleges the student union is significantly involved with such welfare services.

Who pays for supporting the costs of learning?

Funding to support learners with the costs of learning comes from a variety of sources. A frequent cause for concern among college staff is that different criteria are attached to different funding sources, making administration complex and making it difficult for learners to find out about their entitlement.

A Support with direct costs through fee remission

For certain categories of student (see page 1), colleges are required to charge no tuition fees. In these cases, the costs are borne by the government, via the funding formulae, rather than by individual colleges. Where colleges remit fees for students outside these national categories, they must meet the costs themselves.

The costs of the ILA scheme were borne by the government through direct payments to providers by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

B Support with indirect costs

The largest single source of indirect financial support for FE students is Learner Support Funds (previously Access Funds), administered by colleges. These are funded directly by the DfES, which lays down guidelines for their use, and are administered by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (previously the Further Education Funding Council).

Learner Support Funds provide support for:

- course fees, books and equipment
- transport
- childcare
- emergency hardship expenses.

In monetary terms, these funds have grown rapidly in recent years, as they replaced the discretionary awards administered by local authorities, though the total amount available to learners has not significantly increased.

Most colleges supplement from their own budget the amount received from the LSC, and may have established trust funds or similar for student support.

As well as making payments to students to help them with the costs of transport to and from college, many colleges operate their own buses or provide travel passes for students. This area of expenditure is often additional to the Learner Support Fund. In rural areas especially this can be a major element of student support. In most areas the LEA also contributes towards the costs of transport for 16–18 students. The 2002 Education Bill (DfES 2002) imposes a new duty on LEAs to develop a strategic plan for post-16 transport, in collaboration with colleges, local LSCs and other stakeholders.

Students receive support for the costs of childcare in two main ways:

- the direct costs are supported through the Learner Support Funds
- many colleges operate their own nurseries or creches on site, providing subsidised places for the children of students. Many colleges provide funds for this from their own resources, as well as using Learner Support Funds.

Some colleges receive specific residential bursary funds as part of the Learner Support Fund, to support residential students.

C Support for living costs

The Education Maintenance Allowance scheme is funded centrally by the DfES and administered through LEAs.

D Support through student welfare services

The costs of running student welfare services are borne directly by colleges themselves.

Who benefits from support for the costs of learning?

It is difficult to estimate how many students in FE colleges receive 'support', as defined for the purposes of this paper, in any given year.

Returns from institutions to the Learning and Skills Council show that in terms of expenditure from the Access Fund in 1999/2000 (ie largely supporting indirect costs), 103,000 awards were made to students aged 16–18, and 166,000 awards to students aged 19+. Some students will have received more than one award, so the number of people supported in each age group is somewhat less than these two figures combined. The response rate to the LSC was only 78%.

Similar figures are revealed by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), which found in a survey of Learner Support Funds in 1999/2000 (IES 2001) that about 100,000 students were identified as having received financial support from these funds in the responding institutions. Since responding institutions constituted about half the total number of institutions in the FE sector, it is reasonable to assume that around 200,000 people benefit nationally from these funds. This figure is certainly a significant underestimate of the total extent of support, since it does not take account of financial support funded from other college sources – where transport or childcare provision is subsidised directly from a college's main budget, for example. Nor does it include individuals supported from the growing number of funds not held or administered by the college, such as Education Maintenance Allowances or Individual Learning Accounts. It also necessarily excludes those who received other kinds of support that are not measurable in financial terms – counselling perhaps, or advice on benefit entitlements.

We can safely assume that more than a quarter of a million FE students benefit annually from positive 'support' – that is to say that they receive funds. Very many more benefit from fee remission and discounts.

Policy issues

The policy context for student support is complex. When the responsibility was held by LEAs, grants were made to some full-time students resident in the LEA area in the form of 'discretionary awards'. These were largely for younger students and were generally means-tested. However, there was no overall guidance about what the incidence of awards should be, who should receive them, or what areas of expenditure they were designed to cover. Students on some full-time courses of study were generally well supported, however, such as adult students on Access courses or students who were resident at an agricultural or art and design college.

Now, Learner Support Funds (previously Access Funds) are largely allocated to colleges, under an allocation mechanism that tries to take account of local needs, and colleges distribute the funds to students using a set of national guidelines. But there is still significant scope for interpretation of the guidelines, and a built-in flexibility which means that there is still considerable variation between institutions in terms of student entitlement. Adult students are more likely to receive financial support than they were in the past, though at a much lower level, and part-time students are also now eligible.

National initiatives, such as Education Maintenance Allowances and Individual Learning Accounts and their successors, have been developed outside the previous frameworks of learner support. Although this has clearly increased the total support available and the numbers of individuals receiving it, it has also increased the complexity of the overall learner support system. It could be argued that for some of these initiatives there was already a system in place that could have been revised. For example, ILAs were essentially a fee discount arrangement.

How effective is support for the costs of learning?

This section looks at four approaches to assessing the effectiveness of student support:

- a national survey of Learner Support Funds (IES 2001)
- a national evaluation of Education Maintenance Allowances
- the approaches of individual colleges
- findings from 86 college inspections.

A national evaluation of Learner Support Funds

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) surveyed colleges and external institutions (other providers funded via colleges) in late 2000/early 2001. The survey (IES 2001) aimed to gather descriptive information and explore the range of practices used in institutions to administer and distribute financial support for FE students. A total of 319 institutions responded to the survey.

Key findings

- Some colleges make learners aware of certain obligations for receipt of financial support, mainly relating to attendance; students are expected to maintain a satisfactory level of attendance (85–95%). In other cases, the support is conditional on satisfactory conduct, completion of assignments and academic progress. Sometimes these expectations are formalised by means of a 'contract', setting out the conditions attached to continuing financial support.
- Despite the above, only a minority of colleges reported a significant amount of activity in terms of formally monitoring the attendance, retention or achievement rates of learners in receipt of funds.
- Two colleges described a bonus payment scheme, in which 16–18-year-old students receiving financial support could receive an additional payment for exemplary attendance and personal conduct.
- Institutions were asked what measures they used to assess the impact and effectiveness of Learner Support Funds. For example, for the general Access Fund, about three-quarters said that they used retention as a measure, and less than a third said they used attainment.
- Although many institutions find it difficult to assess formally the impact of the funds, they feel strongly that financial support is effective in improving attendance, retention and achievement rates. Particular emphasis is placed on the impact made on retention; colleges feel that many of those receiving support would be unable to complete their courses without the funding.
- All the institutions that were able to monitor and assess the impact of financial support reported a positive effect. Many of them monitored retention rates and compared the retention rate of learners receiving funds with that of the college as a whole. The majority reported that retention among those in receipt of funds was better than for the whole college, with differences between 3% and 15% reported. (In a separate study currently in progress, returns from colleges with residential students show somewhat higher retention rates among students in receipt of residential bursaries than in the college as a whole).
- Not all institutions recorded higher retention rates among learners receiving funds, but they nevertheless regarded the support as having a positive impact. The following comments are typical:

  The groups targeted for FE Access Funds are, as a rule, more likely to drop out of college... The retention data for last year showed only a marginally lower retention rate than for other students. We believe this is an indicator of the success of targeted funding.

  Although the retention figures for those in receipt of Access Funds are less than the college average, the overall retention is improved as those in receipt... of funds would not be able to attend college without this support.

  The IES is also undertaking detailed analysis of the Individualised Student Record (ISR) database in relation to Learner Support Funds. This should result in information about the profile of learners receiving financial support and, crucially, their retention and achievement rates. It will be of interest to all those involved in learner support.

The impact of EMAs

Education Maintenance Allowances are increasingly seen as one of the most successful recent innovations in post-16 policy. Early evidence from the first 15 pilot areas (see also Appendix 2), including research by the LSDA (Fletcher 2000), suggests that EMAs are effective in improving participation in learning and supporting student retention. This has recently been confirmed by the first results from a large-scale evaluation exercise commissioned by the DfEE from the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRISP) and its partners. Copies of three relevant reports (Ashworth *et al* 2001; Legard *et al* 2001; Maguire *et al* 2001) can be downloaded from the DfES website at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

An impressive quantitative analysis of the impact of EMAs has been prepared by CRISP and the Institute for Fiscal Studies, based on interviews with 10,000 young people and their parents in 10 pilot areas and 11 carefully matched control areas. It suggests that EMAs have increased the rate of participation in education overall by some 5%; the effect is more marked for boys than girls and in rural areas compared with urban areas. Only a small part of this increase derives from a reduction in the numbers entering employment or work-based training. CRISP reports that the total entering employment was 2% lower in the pilot areas, while a similar study by the Government Office for the West Midlands reports no reduction in work-based learning.

The research suggests that the payment of the allowances has not impacted on young people's patterns of part-time work, confirming the views of young people previously reported (Davies 1999). The data also shows, however, that those who were in part-time employment in Year 11 achieved better exam results than those who were not. Students from lower-income families were less likely to be in part-time employment than the average, suggesting that factors other than financial need are important.

A key element of the EMA scheme is that payment of the allowance is conditional on regular attendance and on adhering in other ways to a learning agreement. Evidence from the qualitative studies suggests that this 'conditionality' has had a considerable impact on young people's attendance patterns, reducing lateness and absenteeism, particularly among those whose commitment to learning was initially weak. In some cases, it has encouraged young people to remain in education and helped foster a virtuous circle whereby better attendance leads to better performance, increased self-esteem and improved motivation.

These lessons are likely to be reflected in the implementation of the Connexions Card – a smart card being progressively issued to all 16–18 year-olds from September 2001. The card contains personal information, so it can be used as a swipe card for enrolment and daily registration. It is capable of carrying the attendance information on which EMA payments are based, and it could also carry an entitlement to specific assistance with transport. In addition, it will be possible to earn points for specified achievements which can be cashed towards the cost of educational or lifestyle goods and services, sponsored by national brands and local enterprises. It is intended to be a true 'learning loyalty card', applying supermarket techniques to educational ends. It exemplifies the government's 'something for something' policy. The EMA experience suggests that it is likely to work.

Measuring the impact of support at the institutional level

The IES survey (IES 2001) shows that the extent to which institutions systematically assess the impact of student support is variable.

Sometimes specific student support activities take place as part of a 'project', rather than as part of mainstream college activity. Projects are more likely to include formal arrangements for the monitoring and evaluation of student outcomes. Reviewing the reports and outcomes from such projects can therefore provide insights into the issues involved in trying to measure the impact of support. One such set of projects is that overseen by the LSDA under the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme. Much of the material in this section comes from that source.

Often a key indicator, especially for those members of staff directly involved in the project or activity, is simply the number of individuals being supported.

Case study

At the College of North West London, the Student Liaison Team developed an initiative to identify young people at risk and provide packages of individual support. The support, which involved parents if appropriate, was designed to improve attendance and achievement through the use of 'contracts' based on rewards. One of the performance measures for the success of the project was the number of individuals supported – in other words, the fact that 'at-risk' individuals had been identified was a success in itself.

The college also ran a project that involved the provision of mental health support, especially for asylum seekers experiencing trauma problems. The performance measures used were more extensive, involving the attendance, retention and achievement rates of those supported, as well as the numbers involved. These are, of course, the performance measures most often used when trying to assess the impact of student support activity, although attendance and retention are used more often than achievement.

Counselling is an area where a systematic approach to record keeping can help to improve the overall service available to students as a whole without compromising the essential confidentiality of the service provided to individuals. Counsellors generally keep records about the gender, age group and ethnic origin of their clients, and a broad description of the issues discussed (eg financial problems, relationship issues, a matter related to the course). Analysis of these records can help institutions to target support services by identifying students' concerns and to develop services in ways that are appropriate to student need. Analysis of the profile of clients can also help to determine whether any particular groups are more likely to seek support, and conversely whether there are any parts of the student body that do not make use of the service.

Case study

At Newcastle-under-Lyme College, for example, this approach – compiling summary statistics – is taken with counselling and financial advice.

The Student Services section has access to information about the most likely causes of concern (travel, accommodation, benefits, etc). This information could then be used to inform fund distribution in future years. This approach, while not directly linked to individual student success, should contribute to overall success rates by ensuring that support services are used effectively and targeted on the areas of greatest need.

The college also makes extensive use of surveys to assess user satisfaction with a range of college services, such as admissions, counselling, financial support, and advice evenings. This provides an opportunity to assess the impact of services and to develop them in line with learners' needs.

One of the reasons for variable practice in measuring the impact of support is that college management information systems rarely contain information about support provided to learners beyond that which is required for external returns such as the Individualised Student Record. This means it is difficult to correlate the support provided with student outcomes such as retention, achievement or progression. Information about support is typically held in a college's student services section in a format that is not compatible with other college systems. There appears to be little development activity in this area, although there is scope for considerably improved data collection and analysis.

Student support as seen by the FEFC Inspectorate

'Support for students' is one of the cross-college areas that were inspected and graded by FEFC inspectors during college inspections. In an inspection context, the definition of support was wider than that used here, since it included tutoring, careers advice, induction and learning support. Nevertheless, it is useful to examine what inspectors felt were the key features of those colleges that were graded highly and those that were not.

Below is an extract from an analysis of 86 college inspection reports, showing aspects of student support relevant to this paper that were mentioned most often in these inspection reports. 'Grade 1' is the highest inspection grade, and 'Grade 5' is the lowest.

The areas of good practice most often praised in 42 colleges receiving Grade 1 for Support for Students (in order of frequency)

1. Regular monitoring of students' progress
2. Attendance is monitored
3. Sufficient advice and guidance about welfare are available
4. Sufficient counselling support is available
5. There is an ethos of commitment to individual support

The areas criticised most often in 44 colleges receiving Grades 3, 4 or 5 for Support for Students (in order of frequency)

1. No overall coordination or management of student support
2. Inadequate provision of support services
3. Little or no monitoring, eg of attendance
4. Inconsistency in entitlements
5. Slow response rates to requests for support

Source: 86 FEFC inspection reports from the 'second round' of college inspections, 1998–2000.

Inspectors appear to judge that good student support involves regular monitoring of students' attendance and progress, alongside provision of adequate levels of service. In other words, it is important to recognise the links between the provision of support and its impact. Colleges performing less well in inspections are criticised not only for less than adequate levels of service, but also for not making these connections between the support provided and student outcomes in terms of attendance, retention and achievement.

Appendix 1

Case studies

This appendix looks at case studies of five colleges which have undertaken development projects involving student support. The first three were whole-college strategies, the fourth focused on Access Funds and the fifth involved an evaluation of an Educational Maintenance Allowance scheme.

Practical steps to improve retention

Derby Tertiary College Wilmorton

In May 1999, Derby Tertiary College Wilmorton, in response to the national agenda to widen participation and to address the issue of social exclusion, set out to increase its numbers of 16–18-year-old students from groups not previously involved in education or training. The initiative was successful. It resulted in a 20% increase in enrolments in this target group in September 1999.

The college then put in place a range of new measures to increase retention rates during the beginning of the academic year, previously a period during which drop-out rates were high. These measures were successful and the first term's retention rate improved, despite the increased proportion of students from socially and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The institution identified that new types and levels of support would be needed for a new cohort of students.

Partly as a result of research with students in the previous year, the college identified five areas for action to improve retention rates:

- *availability of home-to-college travel*
- *costs of attending college, including travel*
- *home liaison*
- *course timetables*
- *tutor support.*

This was seen as an integrated attempt to make a real impact.

- *The college provided contract buses on five new routes to the college, together with a shuttle bus to the city centre bus and railway stations, running from 8.15am until 9pm. These buses were provided free of charge to students.*
- *All students under 19 were provided with a half-fare bus pass for other bus services.*
- *Home liaison involved immediate contact with a student's home in cases of absence.*
- *Course timetables were amended to minimise 'free periods', resulting in a four-day week for many students.*
- *Tutor support involved a 10-minute registration session with tutors at 8.50am each day.*

The Access Fund was used to support all full-time 16–18 students whose families received income support or working person's tax credit. Students whose families received income support were given a free lunch. All full-time 16–18 students received a stationery / book grant of £25, paid at the end of the first term, subject to satisfactory attendance and completion of coursework.

The impact on early drop-out rates (September – 1 November) was:

		1998	1999
16–18	Level 1	20.0%	4.1%
16–18	Level 2	10.1%	4.6%
16–18	Level 3	3.1%	2.8%

This strategy had very positive outcomes in the areas targeted. The costs were significant, but the college saw them as affordable because of the increased enrolments. Interesting features of this initiative are:

- *using student views to identify the key issues to be addressed*
- *the importance of transport arrangements to young students*
- *tackling several issues at once in an attempt to make a real impact.*

Support and incentives for learners

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology

A development project at Rotherham College of Arts and Technology involved:

- *a review of the computerised information systems to improve the quality and quantity of reliable data relating to student retention and achievement*
- *a redesign of some of the student support services, both tutorial-based and non-academic*
- *the introduction of a student 'Cashback' scheme – students who achieved both attendance rates above 85% and their main learning goals were awarded cash sums of £45–£100.*

The college was concerned that a significant number of students were withdrawing from their courses towards the end of the course, often citing financial problems as the reason. Part of the rationale for the Cashback scheme was to provide an incentive for students to finish their courses and achieve their qualifications. The scheme was introduced alongside other initiatives designed to improve student support:

- *the personal tutorial system was strengthened*
- *induction programmes were introduced*
- *a system of student advisers was set up to support students with non-academic matters.*

In the year after this range of measures was introduced, the college saw a dramatic improvement in retention rates and achievement rates at all levels. While this can probably be explained by improvements in the information system, there seems little doubt that the support-focused project also brought about improvements. The college's own evaluation of the work draws attention to the fact that the impact of the Cashback scheme could have been better monitored by using a questionnaire to ask students about their perceptions of the degree to which it had acted as an incentive.

Basildon College

Basildon College also implemented a range of strategies designed to improve student retention and achievement rates, including:

- *a cash 'loyalty bonus'*
- *increased target-setting and monitoring*
- *improved student support through tutoring.*

Students could claim a cash bonus of £30 at the end of each term if they had attended 90% of their lessons and satisfactorily completed their coursework for the term.

In the first year after the loyalty bonus and some of the other measures were introduced, college retention and achievement rates both increased, and these higher levels were sustained in the following year.

Students who had received the loyalty bonus were asked, through a questionnaire, about motivation. While 61% said that they felt it had motivated them to attend, only 38% felt it had motivated them to keep their work up to date. The college concluded that this might reflect the extent and rigour with which these respective measures had been monitored.

However, students were also asked about the importance of other factors in motivating them to attend and keep their work up to date. Many other factors were perceived by students to be more important than the loyalty bonus. In both cases, the highest rated factor was 'course content interesting', and the second was 'friendly, supportive teachers'. These were followed by factors relating to how varied the lessons were, their relevance to career prospects, regular feedback and help with study skills.

It is not surprising that learners cite direct classroom experience as the most important factor in motivating them to attend classes. The bonus did also appear to have had a positive effect on attendance for some students. Such a scheme does have a significant cost, of course, and the college's overall conclusion is that it was less important than many other factors, and the scheme was discontinued. The project enabled the college to review and revise many of its systems for supporting students and monitoring their progress through the tutorial system and in the classroom.

Monitoring the success of students receiving Access Funding

Exeter College

Concerns about the difficulties inherent in distributing Access Funds led Exeter College to study the distribution mechanism, the impact of the funds on retention and achievement, and the links between financial and other types of support. The overall aim was to provide more effective support for students with financial difficulties and underline the importance of a coordinated and coherent system of support for students. Within this context the objective was to improve the retention and achievement rates of students in financial hardship.

The project involved putting in place new strategies for processing applications to the Access Fund, and linking more closely with tutors and other staff (eg tutors had to endorse applications). Strong emphasis was placed on ensuring that the budget was not over-committed early in the year, so that continuing needs could be met.

Financial support was targeted at students receiving a means-tested benefit or on a low income, and was available for the essential costs of studying, not for the course (travel and childcare) and course-related expenditure (fees, equipment, materials and books). Support for the ongoing elements of costs (eg childcare, transport, materials) would only be released if the student's attendance and performance had been satisfactory – this was a key feature of the revised arrangements. Of learners receiving support from the Access Fund, 79% received it for such ongoing costs and therefore their attendance and performance were monitored.

All applications were logged on a database to allow for better monitoring of the use of the Access Funds and to enable analysis of the distribution of recipients by department and course. The database also enabled the monitoring of attendance, performance and the provision of additional support (although there were difficulties in following through the monitoring of additional support).

Overall summary retention rates for the college were:

- *81% in the year before the project*
- *85% in the year of the project.*

The retention rate for Access Fund recipients in the year of the project was 86%.

Other outcomes of the project show the interdependence of the various aspects of student support:

- *25% of Access Fund recipients received additional learning support*
- *37% of Access Fund recipients also contacted, or were referred to, the Students' Union Welfare Officer for advice and information on benefits, educational trusts and charities, other sources of funding, budgeting, etc.*

Overall, this project appears to have achieved improvements in retention rates as a result of monitoring attendance.

Other points to note:

- *many 19+ students who did not meet the (then FEFC) criteria for fee remission would not have been able to start or continue their studies without the Access Fund*
- *the systematic approach to administering the funds has meant that the college has been able to establish priorities for the use of the funds available*
- *students are more likely to ask for financial support if it is seen as an entitlement, alongside other services available to them*
- *more data on student perceptions of student support would have helped in the evaluation of the project.*

The impact of the Educational Maintenance Allowance

Truro College

Truro College is in one of the areas selected to pilot one of the first Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) schemes in 1999/2000. In the Cornwall scheme, students on full-time FE courses could receive up to £30 weekly, £50 termly, and £50 at the end of their course. The scheme is means-tested, so the payments depend on parental income, with these maximum amounts paid to students with a parental income of less than £13,000 pa. A sliding scale then operates, with payments reducing to zero at an annual parental income of £30,000. The £50 payments are dependent on satisfactory attendance and progress.

The college evaluated the impact of the EMA on participation and retention. The data collected shows an increase of 13% in student numbers in the year the EMA was introduced, and an increase in the student retention rate from 82% to 85%. Other factors may also have been at work, but these are encouraging results.

Crucially, the college also conducted a series of structured interviews with students who were receiving EMAs. It found:

- *high levels of awareness about the aims of the EMA in terms of participation and attendance*
- *a strong feeling among students that their attendance had been much better because of the link to the EMA*
- *one or two students who said they would probably have dropped out without the EMA*
- *little evidence that the EMA had encouraged the student to enrol on the course in the first place – indeed, many students said they were not aware of the scheme until they applied to the college.*

One of the college's conclusions was that: 'on the whole it appeared that remuneration was an incentive to learn, but financial deprivation did not generally remove the desire to learn, just the opportunity'.

Truro College's systematic review and evaluation of the impact of the pilot scheme has enabled it to put in place systems to develop the EMA scheme further. For example, greater effort will be put into promoting the scheme through school liaison, there will be an increased emphasis on attendance monitoring, and better systems of reporting back information on overall attendance to tutors will be put in place.

Appendix 2

Early findings from the Education Maintenance Allowance pilots

Early evaluations of the impact of the pilot Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) programmes are summarised in three Research Briefs issued by the DfEE (Ashworth *et al* 2001; Legard *et al* 2001; Maguire *et al* 2001). The early evaluative work focused on the impact on *participation*, but there also some important pointers to the potential effects on student retention and achievement.

- Participation in the pilot EMA areas appears to have increased by 3–11 percentage points, with an estimated average gain of around 5 percentage points. The scheme appears to have had a greater impact on young men than young women, to have been more successful in rural than in urban areas, and to have had most impact on those eligible for the full amount of allowance.
- The scheme was found to have had considerable impact on young people's attendance patterns. In interviews, 97% of young people who had signed a learning agreement could recall at least one of the specific commitments it had contained, and the one most frequently recalled (by 90% of young people) was attendance. In addition, the stricter monitoring of attendance was reported by colleges as resulting in better attendance patterns, in some cases among non-EMA recipients too.
- Although it was too early to make any assessment of the impact on achievement, there is some evidence of the impact of the scheme on commitment to study and the performance of young people. A number of examples were cited, where improved levels of attendance had created a virtuous circle whereby the young person applied themselves more assiduously to their studies, received positive feedback for their efforts which, in turn, increased the motivation to achieve. Additionally, it is reported that the prospect of two years' funding had led some students to raise the level of their educational goals.
- There was clear evidence that the scheme was encouraging some students to remain in education. This was particularly true for those whose motivation to study was fragile and for some participants from lower-income families – for the latter group, the bonus payments in the scheme appear to have been particularly motivating.

Appendix 3

Research on 16–19 learner support arrangements

Extract from interim findings from *nfer* research.

This nfer [National Foundation for Educational Research] *report sets out the early evidence from a study commissioned by the DfEE to look at the nature of non-participation among the 16–19 age group, to examine the take-up of financial assistance within FE, and to give an overview of the nature and effectiveness of financial and non-financial support in post-16 education and training. The interim report concentrates on the nature of the available data, reports in some detail on factors influencing participation rates (eg gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, type of school attended), and includes information from the early evaluations of the EMA scheme, also summarised in this report.*

The report notes that there is little published data on the actual levels *of financial support received by* individual *further education students – the data available provide information on the value of awards in total, but little further analysis of the way funds are allocated or spent. It adds that, with the exception of the EMA pilots, the published data do not provide information about the* types of students *or the* reasons for allocation *of learner support funds.*

These observations are undoubtedly true, but two issues should also be noted: 1. The work being carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies at the time of writing (including an analysis of the national Individualised Student Record database, covering all FE college students) should contribute enormously to our understanding in this area. 2. There is an opportunity, as the ISR and its successor database are amended to take account of the requirements of the Learning and Skills Council, to capture the information currently provided by colleges in their Learner Support Fund returns to the LSC. This would provide more comprehensive and robust data which would be capable of more sophisticated interrogation than is currently the case. We have already observed in this paper that college core student information systems rarely contain much information about the nature or extent of support (either financial or non-financial) provided to learners.

In examining factors that have an impact on participation in learning, the nfer report draws attention to a number of other studies, and suggests that it is possible that the provision of financial support may have a greater direct impact on participation than on retention and achievement. Certainly a certain level of financial support will be an absolute prerequisite for participation for some students. However the early evaluations of the EMA schemes suggest that, for younger learners at least, a well-designed package of support can provide not only this necessary baseline of funding to enable participation, but also an important incentive to continued attendance and performance by students.

Lines, Morris *et al* 2001

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raising quality and achievement programme

The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges.

- We aim to reach all colleges and all levels of staff.
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Support for the costs of learning

Colleges support their students in different ways – for example by remitting fees, by helping out with associated costs such as childcare or travel expenses, and by offering a student welfare service. But who pays for student support, who benefits from it, and how effective is it in retaining students and helping them to achieve their goals?

This report outlines the range of student support services available, shows how the provision of support can contribute to student success, identifies good practice and explains how systems for evaluating the impact of support can be developed. It is based on current research, inspection findings and case studies from colleges in the Raising Quality and Achievement Programme led by the Learning and Skills Development Agency.

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